



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE RELIGION OF CHILDHOOD. II

HENRY B. ROBINS, PH.D.

Professor in the Rochester Theological Seminary
Rochester, New York

III. Home Religion Indispensable

Just because it is so vastly important, we may introduce at this point some autobiographical fragments showing what home religion brings to pass. The writer has had access to a number of very personal narratives, portions of which he has permission to use here. These narratives were written by young men preparing for the gospel ministry. It is a well-established fact that a large proportion of candidates for the ministry come from Christian homes. These fragments reflect, therefore, only the more fortunate type of experience.

One correspondent, now a successful middle-western pastor, writes:

This will not prove to be an exciting tale. In fact it will be found to be a remarkably quiet and uneventful account of a natural process of unfolding in the religious life. There is in it no crisis, no sudden turning-point, no great upheaval. . . . This I take to be due to nothing unusual in myself, but rather to the wholesome religious atmosphere in which I grew and to the sweet sanity of the training given me by those to whom my early dependent years were entrusted. . . . I do not misstate when I say that, from the first, Christ has been as much a member of that home as any other in it. I mean this without cant or mock piety. Wholesome religion was always a part of the atmosphere in which I grew. It never needed to be dragged in, nor was it confined to formal Sunday observance. My parents lived their religion, and so it was

not strange for them to speak about it. . . . The relationship to God never seemed a remote or unnatural thing, for he was familiar in the home. . . . My baptism was no break in the life I was living and should be mentioned only as an incident. . . . There was no upheaval, for there was no need of one. . . . I did not change my mode of life. I continued to be a plain boy, with all that that means.

From a second narrative I take this brief account of an experience not less fortunate:

It was my privilege to be brought up in a home where the Christian religion was revered and practiced. My father being a minister and my mother deeply interested in religious work, it was quite natural that I, under their guidance, should grow up into the Christian life. In religious matters I was not bound by strict laws so that religion became a burden to me. . . . One of the greatest influences in my early life was our family worship. I can remember how my two brothers and I used to sit around my father and listen to him read Bible stories in his fascinating way. . . . It was so interesting to us that we would beg father to go on. . . . I early learned to pray, and even then it meant something to me. . . . One night, when I was about ten years old, my mother asked me if I would not like to join the church. I told her I would. I did not feel that any great change came into my life, but I had a strong emotional feeling when she spoke to me about being baptized and accepting Jesus as my savior, for I cried for quite a while. . . .

So far as my life was concerned, I cannot see that there was much change. . . .

Another of the same general character furnishes the following:

Since I can remember, I have always been taught of God and religious things. The earliest recollection of religious training is that of my father and mother teaching me to say that prayer so common to many children, "Now I lay me down to sleep." This I used to say every night before going to bed. . . . As soon as I was able to read, I joined the family circle at the daily devotion. This came always after breakfast. So far as I can recall, this form of worship was never omitted for any reason. If we had company, they took part. . . . I think that this family devotion was of great importance in my life, as I gained a more reverent spirit thereby, and then, too, it interested me, which I think was due to the fact that father let us have a share in it. . . . I think that I should say that my religious life has been in the nature of a gradual growth, and this was largely due to the influence of my father. . . . So far as I can remember, he never urged me to join the church. I believe that he thought I would join of my own accord when the time came, so long as he directed me in right lines.

These three men, all of them now in active Christian service, were exceedingly fortunate in their childhood environment. While such an environment does not absolutely guarantee the happy response here evidenced, it goes far to assure the desired outcome. At the other extreme are those who were not so favored. Their childish experience was perforce quite different. To show how different it was a few citations from the same group of personal narratives will be given.

The earliest days of my childhood were not spent in an ideal environment. The religious training and atmosphere were far from what they ought to have been, mainly because of two facts: Father was not a church-going man and cared little about religious influences touching the lives of his children so long as they behaved well and kept out of mischief; and, again, Mother was a Catholic and so was willing to leave the matter of religious training to the church and parochial school. The Bible was not read in the home nor were prayers said at any time, so far as I can remember now. So questions about God and his people, about the Bible and the meaning of prayer, never got any farther than the horizon of my consciousness, if they got that far. In short, the training which I received in my home was non-religious, and that to which I was subjected in Catholicism had little effect upon me, for I can remember that, even in those early years, the whole Catholic system was repulsive to me.

The writer of those lines is now a successful pastor in an eastern city church, but this is due, as also in the case of the author of the following paragraph, to the fact that there are other agencies which are sometimes able to do for the individual in some degree the service in which his home failed. With a somewhat different setting, the following experience is quite as negative as the preceding:

At an early age I was left an orphan. So I grew up without any particular religious training. Practically no systematic religious discipline was received until I had passed beyond adolescence into manhood. Seldom were Sunday-school or church services attended before my twenty-first year. At that time I would not have known the difference between the Old and New Testaments, nor were any of the funda-

mentals of the Bible a part of my mental possession in any other than a vague and general way.

And here is a part of the story of one who might better have been an orphan, perhaps:

My father was a drunkard and nine years ago filled a drunkard's grave. My mother was an habitual drinker, although I have never known her to be intoxicated. But I have repeatedly heard her say that she could never have nursed her children without her pint of ale or porter every day. The first eight years of my life were spent in this slum district, known as "The Hollow."

There is a pathetic contrast between the stories of these three and those of the first three. The ideas of religion which came to the second group were either fugitive or for the most part false, and there was no loving constraint of religion about them in their most intimate relationships.

It is quite impossible to say what proportion of those who become active Christians are the product of Christian homes, but there is evidence enough that the proportion is very large. In a recent study of the early experience of one hundred theological students it was found that eighty-one had both a Christian father and a Christian mother, sixteen had a Christian mother only, while only three had neither.

But home religion does more than assure the outcome, it makes possible a normal and happy adjustment of the life of childhood to the ideals of religion. There is a different temper, an atmospheric quality, about the life of the truly religious home, that pervades the

experience of the child, predetermining life's great issues for it, often before they have become conscious problems at all. It makes possible what increasingly occurs with children so reared—a religious adjustment which is as gradual as it is conclusive, but which is in no sense cataclysmic. A considerable number of those so reared unite in saying that they do not know when they became Christians, for Christianity has never been alien to them.

When we inquire what this home religion was which wrought so enviable a result, we discover, first of all, that it was a quality of living. We find that such homes as exhibit this potent sort of living are controlled by ideals. This is not to say that they are perfect homes; some of them are far from it. But they are pervaded by conviction, indwelt by a spirit of gracious devotion to the kind of life that Jesus exalted. Let there be but the smallest suspicion upon the part of the child that in the practices of religion his parents are playing a part, and the influence of their example is shattered. But there are not many actual hypocrites; most people who are religious at all are, so far as their knowledge goes, in downright earnest. Indifference is perhaps a more insidious menace than hypocrisy. Parents assent to ideals without giving their whole hearts to them, and this sort of double-mindedness plays havoc with the religion of childhood.

But where home religion is effective it is more than a spirit, an atmosphere, an influence. It becomes, so to speak, institutionalized in certain religious practices. There is a great deal of variation in practice at this point, but some stated

practices are quite essential to the effective influence of religion upon childhood. The value of grace at meals, of family Bible-reading and prayer, is unquestioned. They show, in whatever form they are observed, that the whole family is under the claim of religion and gratefully and constantly recognizes the fact. But they do not exist for the children's sake; they are usually standardized by the needs or notions of the adult members of the household.

Just because children learn so largely and so much more readily through example and illustration, through symbol and object, religion ought to be put concretely and simply into their terms. This may be a part of the business of the bedtime story with the little child, a part of the business of the "children's hour" in the case of those a little older. Only so can it become quite evident that religion is their concern. It should go without saying, however, that the end is to make them conscious of religion rather than religiously self-conscious. And for that reason what is done must relate religion to life—to the day's life as the child lives it, with all his childish activities and interests. What have God and religion to do with these? If "religion is life," everything!

Apart from home religion no child can have the experience which Professor Rufus M. Jones relates in *A Boy's Religion from Memory*, when, writing of his mother's death in his fifteenth year, he says:

God had given me my mother, and through her I had learned of Him. There were hundreds of bright points in our lives together when her love and patience helped me to rise to my consciousness of God. I

could not forget how I had heard her in her prayers talk quietly with Him about me, as though she knew Him perfectly, and wanted me to get acquainted with Him. I knew, too, that she fully expected to go on living with Him after death came to her. . . . As her faith in a new and larger life came over me and quickened my own, I began to realize that I had not lost my mother, that she was nearer God than ever, and that I was more than ever bound to her kind of life.

But if parental love and patience do not set out to help childhood rise to its consciousness of God, how shall childhood come to know Him?

IV. The Religious Ideas of Childhood

While the religion of childhood should not be mainly a religion of ideas, it cannot take form without them. What these ideas shall be depends very largely upon the environment. Even with the most ideal surroundings, they will be fragmentary and often refreshingly naïve. Under neglect or by perversion they are certain to become grotesque and sometimes unspeakably oppressive. The ideal is, of course, that the needful notions shall be made so clear that they shall become the basis of helpful and normal attitudes of emotion and will.

It is a very great mistake to suppose that parental orthodoxy alone can guarantee to childhood a helpful view of God. If, in addition to straight thinking, the home breathes an atmosphere of reverence, trust, and love toward God, the chances of childhood are much better. But they are best where the vague outreachings of the childish spirit toward an appreciation of the Divine are understood and sympatheti-

cally interpreted and supplemented. If the notion that God is a loving Father is actually a working religious concept in one's home, it may be assumed that the children who grow up there will build their own religious thinking upon it. But if God is never mentioned, or, if occasionally mentioned, is not actually loved and revered, trusted and obeyed, sporadic notions of his person may take tyrannous control of the little child's earliest consideration of him.

Laying hold upon such sporadic notions of religious objects, the childish imagination often weaves a highly fanciful pattern. These notions do not remain unelaborated, but are combined with childish experiences and observations to form a whole new structure of religion. Left to itself, this may become almost, if not quite, what we should characterize among primitive peoples as nature-worship, demonolatry, etc.

We are not here endeavoring to make an exhaustive analysis of such childish notions. They depend upon the run of attention and upon the subtle tempering of personality which makes some children far more imaginative, others supremely matter-of-fact; but they depend also upon the imagery at hand for the elaboration of religious ideas. The attempt here is rather one of showing the control of such notions as are formed, and the source of the notions themselves. In order to make the discussion concrete, citations are made from the personal narratives to which reference has already been made. The citations are all from experiences which fall between the ages of four and nine.

The first group of citations illustrates the notion of the appearance and char-

acter of God gathered by little children from a type of illustration which, it is to be hoped, is less in vogue today than it was a few years ago. One says:

I got my first conception of God from an illustrated Bible. . . . There God was represented as an old man with a long, curly beard and hair, looking through an opening in the clouds. He had bright, piercing eyes. This image of the All-seeing One never left me. Even to this day it is difficult to get rid of the picture.

Another writes in very similar terms:

An idea which certainly had much to do with my earlier thought of God had its probable source in a picture that I saw God, a man with flowing robes, sitting upon a throne in the skies . . . is old, partially bald, with long white whiskers. . . . Throughout childhood and into manhood he was the being to whom I prayed when I offered prayer.

A third gained an unfortunate impression of the character of God from pictures supposed to illustrate the Bible, chiefly the Old Testament. He says:

I became impressed with the awfulness of God by a little book entitled *Hours with Mamma*, in which there were such illustrated stories as the destruction of the wicked by the flood, the destruction of the wicked children by the bears at the command of Elisha, etc. I can see these pictures as vividly as though I had looked at them yesterday. I had no realization of the love of God or of love for God in those early years. . . . Nor did Jesus enter into my religious thinking.

A final citation of this class involves the Sunday school:

The earliest Sunday-school lesson I remember was one which the teacher illustrated by a charcoal or crayon drawing. The wrath of God was painted as a big,

black cloud, hanging ominously over the scene and apparently about to engulf the world. On his knees under the cloud was a prophet, trying by his prayer to avert the cloud. . . .

Pictures have been a frequent source of childish notions of God, heaven, angels, Satan, hell, etc. Altogether apart from the question of the validity of any of these notions is that of the wisdom of attempting their pictorial portrayal. Even with the best endeavor to explain them as ideal creations, such pictures are the means of fixing in memory a great amount of misinformation. Where they deal with the horrors of destiny, they become unspeakably pernicious. The influence of such pictures is shown by the following statements:

As far back as I can remember, our family possessed a certain large, red-backed book, entitled *Character Sketches*. . . . It was illustrated, and no other illustrations have ever impressed me as those did. They were very sensational, picturing the devil, horned and hooved and with pointed tail and trident. . . . To counterbalance the dark side of this illustration-scheme there was an equally bright side, representing heaven in all its glory, with white-robed and winged angels. . . . Those pictures became the foundation upon which my imagination built. I would often dream about them. . . . Naturally I became very much interested in my soul's welfare.

From another of these narratives comes the following:

At the age of seven or eight there came into my hands a book at which the older members of the family had been looking. In this book I saw various pictures of the devil and the horrors of hell, with its flames enveloping and devouring the unfortunate

inhabitants of that dark abode. . . . This made a profound impression upon my childish mind, and the fear of punishment was undoubtedly a factor in shaping my thoughts of God. . . .

Another says:

When I was about seven years of age I attended a children's meeting where an evangelist gave a lurid chalk-talk on the fate of Dives. I still have a vivid impression of the red, yellow, and green pictures he drew when he described the torments of the underworld. . . .

Not all experiences of vivid impressions made by pictures are so somber. The following, which refers to the death of Jesus, bears a somewhat different aspect. It is an interesting question what effect such a picture, apart from some sufficient explanation of its inner meaning, would have upon the mind of a child. The writer says:

When I was eight, my uncle's copy of a book, *The Beautiful Story*, with very highly colored pictures, made a very great impression on me, especially the one representing the Savior's suffering in Gethsemane. . . . I never forgot it. . . . But we were not taught to fear Satan, or to believe in hobgoblins and similar creations.

While such pictures, in the instances cited found chiefly in subscription books of the class by which uneducated people are so often victimized, are a particularly concrete source of the religious ideas of children, they are probably not at all the chief source. Bible stories form an important basis of childhood's religious conceptions, and not seldom it is the same element which we have found embodied in the lurid picture that seizes the imagination of the hearer and

becomes a permanent influence. Here is a statement illustrating this fact:

When I was about five, the story of Elisha and the mocking children was told me. One day when I was aping a cripple, the story flashed into my mind, for I stopped suddenly and asked, "Mama, are there any she-bears around here?"

Another refers to the same story:

The Scripture which seemed to leave a lasting impression upon me was of that sort which showed the power of God in some special way. For example, the punishment of those who mocked Elisha, where the she-bears came out and killed forty-two of the children for saying "Go up, thou baldhead" . . . made a profound impression upon me with regard to the power of God and his punishment of sin. . . .

In beautiful contrast to such experiences is the following:

The first thing that I can remember in regard to religion is the story that once Jesus held children in his arms. If I mistake not, I came to believe in some vague sense that he had so held me. Thus, from the very beginning, I had only the most friendly feeling for Jesus.

Very frequently the minister's sermons, especially at revival meetings to which small children are taken, make a lasting impression. Though such sermons are rarely addressed to the children themselves, under the pressure of suggestion very small children may do in an imitative way the things they see their elders doing. Under Free Methodist influence, for example, as in the following instance, the very young are sometimes strongly moved:

At a revival meeting, when I was about five years old, sin and salvation were held up very earnestly. . . . My Sunday-

school teacher came over to where my brother, two years my elder, was and spoke to him. In a moment he went forward and knelt at the "altar." Then our teacher came and said, "If God can save H—, he can save F—, too." Immediately I started to the "altar." After a time of prayer, personal and general, one of the ministers shouted, "Look up!", and we all looked up. Some may have understood the spiritual significance of it. . . .

Or, though impressed, the child may fail to follow the suggestion of the minister in the revival meeting, as in the following case:

The first crisis in my religious life came when I was about eight years of age. Father was conducting a revival campaign, and—as we once irreverently expressed it—preaching "hell-fire and damnation." This made a profound impression on my young heart, but I could never persuade myself to go to the altar publicly as others of my own age were doing. . . . I was taken ill during this period of revival, and the thought came to me, "What if you should die? You would surely go to hell." I didn't want to go there, so, while the rest were attending the revival services, I read my Bible and prayed to God. . . .

What an experience for a child of five or six was this:

When I was about five or six, there occurred a revival in our church and my brother and sister were baptized. . . . I wanted to be converted also. I was told that I must pray to God for the forgiveness of my sins, and . . . I prayed with tears. . . . For lack of a better prayer, I spoke the prayer that I used at table, just a simple thanking God for food. But there was nothing came of my prayers. . . . O how my heart did thump against my little breast! Surely something was going on within. But all was calm again after a

while; I felt no change, and I became discouraged. . . .

Such an experience in a revival meeting may reverse what years have been effecting in the childish mind and establish a wholly new notion of God and duty, as in the instance which follows:

I was a perfectly healthy-minded Christian through my childhood until I reached the age of eleven. Then I attended a series of meetings. . . . The minister preached a sermon in which he described hell. . . . It was the first time that I had heard about hell to any extent. . . . I realized that the preacher and I had entirely divergent views about God. I had always thought of God as a kind, loving being who loved children and would do nothing to harm them, but he described God as a Being who stood beside little children when they played and put their bad deeds down on a large sheet of paper, so that he should not forget to punish them afterwards. . . . Of course, I thought, "the minister must be right."

Not seldom the child builds his notion of God upon the foundation of some chance remark or inference. One of my friends writes:

Father told us that he had found my baby brother in a bunch of cornstalks, where God had placed him. It made a tremendous impression on my mind. . . . It was so cold that I wasn't permitted to go outside, and I couldn't understand how God should leave a tiny baby in a field, or how the baby kept from freezing. . . . This experience gave me my first serious and lasting impression of God. I saw Him in the storms of every season. . . .

Another chance remark, probably often repeated, affected the same child. He says:

At the age of nine, God was a terror to me. . . . This was because I was told that he hated naughty boys, that he loved only good children, that the Bad Man would get bad boys, and that I could not go to heaven unless I was good. At that time I was afraid to go to bed at night, and when sick was afraid of dying and being lost.

In a similar fashion the belief that the end of the world is imminent may become a part of the working basis of childish thought. The same correspondent writes:

One day, when I was seven, mother called us early, as there was a glorious sunrise. It was, as I remember, a very gorgeous and spectacular display of light. We began questioning what it meant, and were told that it looked as if the world were coming to an end. It so terrified me that I had to be taken into the house.

Another instance, in this case a happy one, of the influence of what was probably an incidental bit of instruction:

During the years from eight to ten I thought about God a good deal of the time. On one occasion, when I went after the cattle, I became very thirsty. I recalled the statement in the Bible that if we would come to Jesus we should never thirst. I came to him on the spot, the only way I knew how, and my thirst soon left me.

But the same lad shared with the preceding correspondent a fear of the end of the world:

I remember being very much impressed by stories that the world was soon to come to an end. I was so impressed that I dreamed a great deal of the second coming. . . . I remember some of these dreams to this day.

Numbers of these incidental influences were wholesome, or at any rate not

depressing, as, for instance, the following:

From about six, I remember singing in Sunday school "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." I often wondered in what way he would show his friendliness, for, although according to the hymn he was supposed to bear all our sorrows and griefs, it seemed that I had to bear most of the consequences of my badness myself.

When left largely to themselves, the inferences formed may be anything but happy, as this testimony shows:

As I was left to form my conception of God from what my own undeveloped mind discerned in nature and in the greater manifestations of power, in storms and the like, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, a loving Father who desires men to be saved, was practically unknown to me. My life was indeed miserable most of the time for a period of eight or nine years. . . .

Careful instruction and happy surroundings go far to insure a cheerful and childlike trust in God, as these lines indicate:

From the moment when my mother told me of God and that he made the world, I had reverence for him. My idea of things changed: I was in God's world. . . . From six to eleven, I made many trips in God's outdoors. . . . I was much in the woods, along the streams, in the fields. . . . I thought God was there. . . . I would listen for his audible voice.

And another says:

It was always with joy that I found the first wild flower in the spring and took it to mother. . . . Back of the wildness and beauty of the woods there dwelt a Spirit with which I felt a oneness. . . . In these early days I learned to worship God in nature.

And God is not always a terror to childhood, nor the thought that he is all-seeing. One testifies:

One of the most distinct of my impressions at four or five was that God can see us all, though we cannot see him. On one occasion I stood in the back yard of our home and looked up into the sky, hoping that God would let me see him. . . . How I wished that he might let me have a glimpse of him!

Yet well-meant efforts may well fail of their end, especially if they fail to discriminate between a structure of theology and the religious ideas which answer childish needs. What apparent relation has the doctrine of the Trinity to children's lies? The following may show how one mother introduced it in such connection:

When I was five, or perhaps less, I told a lie, and my mother was teaching me how wrong it was. . . . In her earnestness she was explaining to me how God could forgive sin for his Son's sake. She then entered into the mystery of the Trinity, showing that God and his Son were one. My attention was caught by her earnestness and my mind deeply affected by the wonder of the idea expressed, and in later years I have often recalled the sense of childish awe I then experienced.

The instances cited do not cover the whole area of childhood sufficiently to reveal all the forces at work to determine childhood's ideas of religion, but they do at least reveal certain of the chief factors: pictures, Bible stories, Sunday-school teaching, sermons, chance suggestion and inference, parental instruction, etc. So far from suggesting that there is an innate idea of God which comes universally to definition and

expression, they very clearly show that the form and effect of children's religious ideas is largely determined for them by environment.

Since this is true, and it is to a great degree possible to control the environment, it is one of the first duties of the elder generation to see to it that only those ideas which function helpfully in the life of childhood are presented to it. Studies of childhood's religious experiences made in any average community in western Christendom will substantiate the view that much of the structure of ideas which comes to childhood in the guise of religion is not only of no help but positively harmful. This is chiefly because the prevailing adult view of religion is itself defective, vitiated both

by a wholly inadequate view of the relation of childhood to religion and by false theological notions. That predestination and hell, the devil, the judgment, and the second coming should be formative concepts in the religion of childhood is absurd.

Negatively, childhood has the right to be safeguarded from vague and haunting fears. It has a right to live happily in a world of beauty and moral order, with its early morning unclouded. And this is possible only when the little world of childhood is clean and pure, and the vile, the capricious, the grotesque, and the violent are kept far away. But, positively, childhood has a right to be nurtured in religion, for only so can it think truly.